

## A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgard in Christian History and Historiography<sup>1</sup>

*The Sasanian king Yazdgard I (399–420 CE) is the subject of a complex, millenium-long historical tradition, spanning a multitude of languages and literary traditions over a millennium. Whereas later Persian and Arabic historians reviled Yazdgard as “the Sinner” and celebrated his death, Christian writers developed a complex relationship with the memory of the Sasanian king. Yazdgard’s legalization of public Christian worship in Iran and sponsorship of the first synod of the Church of the East were embraced hopefully by Christian writers as the actions of a “second Constantine.” But the persecutions of Christians that marked the end of Yazdgard’s reign challenged this benign image. Over time, the dualities of Yazdgard’s actions were ignored, rationalized, and ultimately embraced by Christian writers in Syriac and Greek. These writers transformed the actions of Yazdgard, “sinner” and “second Constantine,” into a study of the promise and perils of non-Christian rule.*

In the eleventh year of the reign of Yazdgard, King of Kings, the victorious. After peace and tranquility were restored to the churches of the Lord, [this king] gave freedom and rest to the congregations of Christ, and allowed the servants of God to exalt Christ publicly in their body, either with their death, or during their life; he drew aside the storm of the persecution of all of the flocks of Christ, indeed, he had ordered in all his empire that the temples destroyed by his fathers might be magnificently reconstructed in his own time; that those who had been tested for God, who had suffered prisons and tortures, should go in liberty; that the priests, the chiefs together with

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all the holy order should circulate with complete freedom and without fear  
(*Synodicon orientale*)<sup>2</sup>

By officially ending the persecutions initiated by Shapur II (309–79) in the 340s, the Sasanian king Yazdgard I (399–420) secured for himself a place as a pivotal figure in the history of the Church of the East (now commonly called “Nestorian” or “East Syrian”) and in the development of Christianity outside the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, modern scholars conventionally have taken the opening quotation, from the acts the Synod of Mar Ishāq of 410 CE, as Yazdgard’s Sasanian version of Constantine’s Edict of Milan of 313 CE.<sup>4</sup>

For much of his reign, Yazdgard’s relations with his Christian subjects greatly resembled those of the Roman emperor Constantine a century before, at least as portrayed by Eusebius of Caesarea. After declaring their toleration of Christian worship and establishing peace and tranquility in their dominions, both Constantine and Yazdgard turned their attention to the organization and administration of church affairs by convening a church council. Indeed, the *Synodicon orientale*, a collection of councils held by the Church of the East, established the primary function of the synod of 410 as the confirmation of the acts of Constantine’s council at Nicaea, held in 325. Furthermore, both Constantine and Yazdgard initiated lasting traditions of mutual aid and exploitation between Christian bishops and the monarchy in their respective empires, with enormous consequences for the social and political history of Late Antiquity and the medieval period. Finally, despite the great favor they showed to their Christian subjects, both rulers remained nominally (or entirely) un-Christianized until their dying day, Constantine delaying his baptism and Yazdgard never converting to Christianity at all.

This study is a preliminary investigation of how Christian writers of the late ancient and medieval periods interpreted the reign of Yazdgard I.<sup>5</sup> It suggests that Syriac, Greek, and Arabic historical writing on Yazdgard I (see appended Figure) was shaped by positive official rhetoric from Yazdgard’s contemporaries among both the leaders of the Church of the East and the

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed., tr., *Synodicon orientale, ou recueil de synodes nestoriens* = *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale et autres bibliothèques* 37 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 17–18 [= *Synodicon orientale*]. See also Oskar Braun, tr., *Das Buch der Synhados oder Synodicon orientale* (Stuttgart/Vienna: Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900; repr. Amsterdam: Philo, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Jérôme Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l’empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide (224–632)*, (Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1904), 87–103; Arthur Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1944), 269–73.

<sup>4</sup> Labourt, *Christianisme*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> In the interests of space, Christian Armenian historical traditions about Yazdgard are omitted. Although their material is of great interest, the focuses of Armenian writers are quite distinct from the concerns of writers in Greek, Syriac, and Christian Arabic.

representatives of the Roman Empire. Both of these groups saw Yazdgard's treatment of his Christian subjects as the harbinger of a fundamental shift in the status of Christians under Sasanian rule, analogous to Constantine's reforms a century earlier. Yet, this portrait was challenged by an outbreak of persecution and anti-Christian violence in the last year of Yazdgard's reign, chronicled in a cycle of near-contemporary Syriac martyrologies and later histories that draw upon them, starting with Theodoret's Greek ecclesiastical history. Furthermore, in non-Christian, Perso-Arabic historical traditions, Yazdgard became notorious as a brutal oppressor of the Magian aristocracy, and as a sinner (Arabic epithet "*al-Aṭīm*") who met a well-deserved demise, kicked to death by a supernatural horse sent to punish his evildeed.<sup>6</sup> Confronted with this material, later Christian writers initially sought to ignore, explain, or justify the negative aspects of Yazdgard's rule. Ultimately, Christian historians, particularly in the East Syrian historical tradition, came to explain the enigma of Yazdgard's actions by de-emphasizing the agency of the king. Thus Yazdgard, a "new Constantine" to his Christian contemporaries, became, in later Christian accounts, a simple pawn of both saints and demons.

Although compiled during the patriarchate of Timothy I (780–823 CE), the *Synodicon orientale*, in its record of the acts of the Synods of 410 and 419/420, may capture the earliest Christian attempts to understand the reign of Yazdgard in historical context.<sup>7</sup> These formulations, whether they are authentically early or an aspect of a later redaction of the material, had a lasting influence on writers composing the history of Yazdgard's reign.

The synodal acts, summarized neatly in the epigraph above, emphasize Yazdgard's break with the persecuting practices of his ancestors, his liberation of Christian believers, his friendly relations with the Roman Empire, and his close rapport with Christian bishops, in particular Mārūtā, the bishop of Maiferqāt and Roman ambassador to the Sasanian court; Ishāq, the metropolitan of Seleucia-Ctesiphon; and Ya[h]blāhā, Ishāq's eventual successor. The bishops assembled at these synods effusively styled their patron Yazdgard as "victorious," "friend of peace," and "glorious, powerful, and peaceful," and as a king "whose rule, by the grace of God, makes peace reign in all the

<sup>6</sup> A legend explored by A. Shapur Shahbazi, "The Horse that Killed Yazdgerd 'the Sinner'," in Siamak Adhami, ed., *Paitimāna, Essays in Iranian, Indo-European, and Indian Studies in Honor of Hanns-Peter Schmidt* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), 355–61; see also Touraj Daryaei, "History, Epic, and Numismatics: On the Title of Yazdgerd I (*Rāmšahr*)," *American Journal of Numismatics*, 2nd ser., 14 (2002), 89–95.

<sup>7</sup> The antiquity of the contents of the *Synodicon orientale* has been a matter of some debate, particularly the anachronistic use of some church titles (*catholicos*) and the form of the 410 synod's Christological formulation. See André de Halleux, "Le symbole des évêques perses au synode de Séleucie-Ctésiphon," *Göttinger Orientalforschungen. Syriaca* 17 (1987), 283–94. These anachronisms probably result from later redaction rather than wholesale invention.

universe and whose benevolence earns the exaltation of the churches and the flocks of Christ in all of the east.”<sup>8</sup>

Probably reiterating the language used by the bishops assembled at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, the synodal acts do much to highlight the passing resemblance between the activities of Yazdgard and Constantine. The most common epithet associated with Yazdgard’s name and title, “victorious” (*zākhyā*), also appears alongside Constantine’s name in its every appearance in the text.<sup>9</sup> Like Constantine, Yazdgard brought peace to the Christian community, from both external persecution and internal disunity. The account of the Synod of 410 paints the council as an affirmation of the canons of Nicaea, and emphasizes Yazdgard’s role (like Constantine’s) as the facilitator of the synod, an active participant (through his intermediaries), and the ultimate guarantor of the bishops’ rulings.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the account of the *Synodicon orientale* appears to capture a conscious effort on the part of the fifth-century bishops of the Church of the East to fashion Yazdgard into a Sasanian Constantine, who broke with the persecutions of his forefathers, ushered in a new age of peace and prosperity for his Christian subjects, and forged a détente with Christian Rome. Whereas this clearly was a case of wishful thinking on the part of Christian observers, the extraordinary persistence of this theme, even in the face of overwhelming negative evidence, was an essential element of Christian historical writing for centuries to come. Indeed, the remarkable belief that Yazdgard was even, like Constantine, at the point of baptism at the time of his death persisted throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup>

The other near-contemporary literary sources for the reign of Yazdgard, however, the cycle of Syriac martyrologies associated with the last year of his reign, offer, on their face, a radically different image of Yazdgard’s kingship. Paul Devos characterized four martyrologies (of ‘Abdā, Narsai the Ascetic, Ṭaṭāq, and the Ten Martyrs), as “historical pieces,” with the last three apparently written by a certain Abgar, resident in Bēt Aramayē (near Seleucia-Ctesiphon),

<sup>8</sup> “Victorious”: *Synodicon orientale* 17, 18, 19, 20, 37; “friend of peace”: *Synodicon orientale* 37; “glorious, powerful, and peaceful”: *Synodicon orientale* 40; “whose rule . . .”: *Synodicon orientale*, 37. Note also that Roman bishops in the west likewise directed effusive rhetoric at non-Roman monarchs who permitted them to summon councils, such as the Arian Visigoth Alaric II and the Frank Clovis, at the councils of Agde (506) (“flexis in terram genibus pro regno eius pro longaevitate . . . deprecemur, ut . . . regnum eius dominus felicitate extenderet”) and Orléans (511) (“ex evocatione gloriosissimi regis Chlothovechi”): *Corp.Chr.Lat.* 148.192, 148A.4.

<sup>9</sup> *Synodicon orientale*, 20, 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Synodicon orientale*, 21–2.

<sup>11</sup> In a similar fashion, in the west, the Frankish king Clovis was portrayed as a second Constantine at the time of his own baptism ca. 500 CE (Greg.Tur. *Hist.* 2.19: “procedit novus Constantinus ad lavacrum”).

in the reign of Yazdgard's son and successor, Bahram V.<sup>12</sup> These martyrologies document a short, intense period of persecution of Christians lasting into the early years of Bahram V's reign, also associated with a brief conflict between Rome and Persia.<sup>13</sup> In most of these martyrologies, Yazdgard himself plays some role in the trial and execution of Christian martyrs, a point which will be considered further below.

Curiously, Yazdgard's persecution of Christians did not universally blacken his image in later Christian literature. Indeed, Constantinople-based historians writing in Greek in the fifth and sixth centuries held Yazdgard in the highest regard in their writings. Socrates, writing in the 440s, even claims that Yazdgard, "in no way troubled the Christians in his dominions" and that only the king's death prevented his conversion to the Christian faith.<sup>14</sup> Socrates places the breakdown of Sasanian relations with Christians (and more importantly, with Rome) in the reign of Bahram V.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Socrates provides the earliest witness for the life of Mārūtā, in which the bishop of Maiferqāt influences Yazdgard by miraculously healing the king of a headache the Magian priests could not cure, exposing the pernicious—and amusing—scheming of the Magi (who sought to discredit Mārūtā by hiding a man under a temple fire to denounce the king in the name of the Magian god[s], and by creating a revolting stink in the king's chambers, then accusing the Christians of making it), and expelling a demon troubling the king's son with the aid of a "Bishop of Persia" called either Abdas or Ya[h]blāhā.<sup>16</sup> The *vita* of Mārūtā survives in three versions, two Greek (early and eleventh century) and one Armenian (sixth century or later) that all probably derive, along with the account of Socrates, from a lost Syriac text. This *vita* of Mārūtā clearly was a central element of later presentations of Yazdgard's reign, particularly East Syrian traditions.

By contrast, the sixth-century secular historians Procopius and Agathias ignored Yazdgard's relations with his Christian subjects entirely. Instead, they examined the Iranian king's barbarian honor and nobility, relating the rather bizarre story that Arcadius appointed Yazdgard the guardian of his

<sup>12</sup> Paul Devos, "Les martyrs persans à travers leurs actes syriaques," in *Atti del Convegno sul tema: La Persia e il mondo greco-romano* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1966), 213; Idem, "Abgar, hagiographe perse méconnu (début du V<sup>e</sup> siècle)," *Analecta Bollandiana* 83 (1965), 303–328.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Holum, "Pulcheria's Crusade, AD 421–22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 18 (1977), 153–72; Omert J. Schrier, "Syriac Evidence for the Roman-Persian War of 421–422," *GRBS* 33 (1992), 75–87.

<sup>14</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist.eccl.* 7.8, 18; Theodorus Lector, *Hist.eccl.* 313 (92.24–7).

<sup>15</sup> Soc. *Hist.eccl.* 7.18.

<sup>16</sup> Soc. *Hist.eccl.* 7.8. Curiously, the account also mentions "Abdas bishop of Persia," presumably 'Abda, bishop of Hormizd-Ardašīr, associated with the destruction of a Magian fire temple and the subsequent persecution of Christians.

son, Theodosius II, a decision that Procopius regards with great approval.<sup>17</sup> Agathias notes that this tale was “on the lips” of Roman commoners and aristocrats alike, but he could only find it written in the work of Procopius. Here we see a bit of Agathias’ backhanded criticism of Procopius’ research practices, disguised as praise.<sup>18</sup>

For Constantinople-based authors and audiences in the fifth and sixth centuries, Yazdgard provided a convenient model of a “good”, barbarian, non-Christian king.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the precise chronology and character of Yazdgard’s reign were secondary to his narrative utility as an archetype. This reached its apotheosis in the writings of Procopius, who introduces the king early in his narrative to highlight the distinction between the noble Yazdgard and his villainous successor Kusro I, defined by his seemingly insatiable appetite for bloodshed and conquest.<sup>20</sup> In this tradition, the fates of Christians under Sasanian rule were subordinate to the broader complexities of Sasanian-Roman relations.

Even the early Syriac martyrologies mentioned above make a concerted effort to reconcile the pro-Christian accomplishments of Yazdgard with the ugly events of his final year on the throne, even going so far as to justify Yazdgard’s actions. For example, the *Acts* of ‘Abdā, preserved in fragmentary form in Syriac and in the Greek *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoret, establish the destruction of a fire temple by the bishop ‘Abdā or the priest Haššu in the city of Hormizd-Ardašir and the refusal of Christians to rebuild it as Yazdgard’s pretext for persecuting Christians.<sup>21</sup> Theodoret, writing twenty to thirty years after the event, rationalizes the persecution entirely in these terms.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Theodoret admires ‘Abdā’s unwillingness to rebuild the fire temple, he clearly believes that the destruction of the temple was inappropriate and unwise, and that Yazdgard had some justification for his actions.

<sup>17</sup> Procop. *Bell.pers.* 1.2.

<sup>18</sup> Agath. *Hist.* 4.26.3–8; 4.26.8 appears to borrow from Socrates.

<sup>19</sup> This may fit with Agathias’ evident attempt (*Hist.*, 4.26.2) to illustrate the similarities between Sasanian practices and those of the pagan Roman past.

<sup>20</sup> Procopius’ account of Justin’s (and Justinian’s) rejection of a parallel offer of guardianship over Kusro I by Kavad (ca. 518) may reflect the changed political circumstances of the sixth century, or might present an aspect of Procopius’ criticism of the conduct of Roman-Persian diplomatic relations in his own time.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriace* [= AMS], 7 vols. (Paris/Leipzig: Harrasswitz, 1890–97; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 4.250–3; Theodoret, *Hist.eccl.* 5.38.

<sup>22</sup> The account has been challenged by Lucas Van Rompay, “Impetuous Martyrs? The Situation of the Persian Christians in the Last Years of Yazdgard I (419–420),” in M. Lamboigts, P. van Deun, eds., *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective. Memorial Louis Reekmans = Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium* 117, (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 363–375. See also, Michael Gaddis, *There is no Crime for Those who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 196–200.

Other martyrologies of the period also appear to make some effort to explain or lessen the gravity of Yazdgard's role in the persecutions.<sup>23</sup> As in Roman accounts of the martyrdoms in the Great Persecution, Christians facing execution under Yazdgard were offered a variety of opportunities to avoid death: apostasy, disavowal of their "crimes," or suffering lesser penalties. The martyrologies portray Yazdgard as a voice of reason, restraining the zeal of the Magian priests, offering lesser punishments, ordering the ultimate penalty only when given no other choice by the outrage of the Magi and the pious obstinacy of the Christian martyrs. Thus, whereas the persecution of Christians gained Yazdgard no credit in Christian literature, the earliest negative sources do their best to absolve the king for some of his bad behavior.

Later writers in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic faced the unenviable task of reconciling unambiguously positive accounts of Yazdgard's reign with more negative, or at least equivocal, images from the martyrological sources. The later chroniclers' and encyclopedists' attempts to reconcile this evidence led to a variety of internally inconsistent portraits of Yazdgard, not overly surprising given the cut-and-paste origins of many medieval writings. These are particularly pronounced in chronicles, such as that of Theophanes Confessor, that amalgamated the accounts of the Greek historians with more critical elements from Syriac traditions, transmitted through Theodoret or a lost "Oriental Source," probably the West Syriac chronicle of Theophilus of Edessa.<sup>24</sup> Theophanes reiterates the accounts of the Greek secular and ecclesiastical histories, recounting Yazdgard's guardianship over Theodosius II and the king's

<sup>23</sup> AMS, 4.170–88. For general discussion of traditions and literary tropes of the early martyrological traditions of the Church of the East, see Gernot Wiessner, *Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte. 1. Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II*, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. no. .67 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> See Cyril Mango, Roger Scott, eds., *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), lxxiv–xcviii for a general discussion of sources. The chronicle of Theophilus, probably composed ca. 750, is a primary source for Theophanes (through a probable Greek extension of the text to 780) and his Greek-language successors. In addition, this work was exploited by a variety of chronicles in eastern Christian historical traditions, such as the lost Syriac chronicle of Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē (d. 845), its users Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) and the *Chronicle of 1234*, and the Arabic *Kitāb al-unwān* of Agapius (d. ca. 950). See Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1997), 400–9; Lawrence I. Conrad, "Theophanes and the Arabic Historical Tradition: Some Indications of Intercultural Transmission," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1990), 1–44; Idem, "The Conquest of Arwād: A Source-Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East," in Averil Cameron, Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I. Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1989), 317–402, esp. 322–348; Nana Pigulevskaja, "Theophanes' *Chronographia* and the Syrian Chronicles," *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 16 (1967), 55–60; E.W. Brooks, "The Sources of Theophanes and the Syriac Chroniclers," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 15 (1906), 578–87.

receptivity to the preaching of Mārūṭā and ‘Abdā by which he “reached the pinnacle of piety, so that he was almost on the point of baptism.” But Theophanes then notes, “He [Yazdgard] was deceived by the Magi and stirred up a great persecution of the Christians in Persia,” which he then explains drawing on Theodoret’s account of the martyrdom of ‘Abda. Here, the Magi receive a greater share of the blame than ‘Abdā, although the bishop still is faulted for not applying his “zeal for God” where it was appropriate.<sup>25</sup>

East Syrian historians introduced a more radical interpretation of the conflicting evidence of the reign of Yazdgard, albeit one that was a logical extension of the *topoi* of hagiography and martyrology.<sup>26</sup> This historical tradition neatly solved the “problem” of Yazdgard’s two-sided reign by denying him any real historical agency, reducing him to an important bit player in the biographies of the bishops and holy men of the Church of the East. The tenth-century Arabic *Chronicle of Si‘irt* provides the most fully articulated expression of this historiographical tendency.<sup>27</sup>

The *Chronicle of Si‘irt* retells most of the familiar elements of Yazdgard’s reign, omitting the western tradition of Yazdgard’s guardianship of Theodosius (it does mention his peace with the Romans). The *Si‘irt Chronicle*, however, is rather different in tone from the surviving earlier accounts of Yazdgard’s reign. First, the text clearly borrows some material from the hostile Perso-Arabic historical tradition, calling Yazdgard *al-Aṭīm* (“The Sinner”), and noting his campaign against the nobles of the empire who murdered his royal predecessors.<sup>28</sup> More interestingly, the *Chronicle* restructures the events of Yazdgard’s reign into a cautionary tale for kings and bishops alike.

Like Socrates, the author of the *Chronicle of Si‘irt* ascribes Yazdgard’s favorable attitude toward the Christians to the piety of Mārūṭā and that saint’s

<sup>25</sup> Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5906, pp.82–3.

<sup>26</sup> Sources on Yazdgard I from this “East Syrian” historical tradition include the problematic *Chronicle of Arbēl* (sixth century?), the lost ecclesiastical histories of Daniel bar Maryam (c. 650) and Išō’dnāḥ of Basra (c. 850), the anonymous *Chronicle of Si‘irt* (c. 950), the chronography of Elias of Nisibis (c. 1018), and the late religious encyclopedia, the *Kitāb al-majdal*, associated with Mārī b. Sulaymān, ‘Amr b. Mattā, and Šalība b. Yūḥannā, probably compiled between the 11th and 14th centuries. See Erika Degen, “Daniel bar Maryam. Ein nestorianischer Kirchenhistoriker,” *Oriens Christianus* 52 (1968), 45–80; Bo Holmberg, “A Reconsideration of the *Kitāb al-Mağdal*,” *Parole de l’Orient* 18 (1993), 255–73. See also Appendix below.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Sako, “Les sources de la Chronique de Séert,” *Parole de l’Orient* 14 (1985), 155–66; Jean Maurice Fiey, “Išō’dnāḥ et la *Chronique de Seert*,” *Parole de l’Orient* 6–7 (1975–6), 447–59; Ranier Degen, “Zwei Miszellen zur Chronik von Se‘ert,” *Oriens Christianus* 54 (1970), 76–95; Erika Degen, “Die Kirchengeschichte des Daniel bar Maryam—Eine Quelle der Chronik von Se‘ert?,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft. Supplementa* 1.2 (1969), 511–6; Idem, “Daniel bar Maryam.”

<sup>28</sup> Addai Scher, ed., *Histoire nestorienne inédite (Chronique de Séert)*. *Patrologia Orientalis* 4.3, 5.2, 7.2, 13.4 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907–18), 1.204 (= *Chronicle of Si‘irt*).



miraculous cure of Yazdgard's headache.<sup>29</sup> The chronicler expands upon this, describing in detail Yazdgard's close relations with the bishops Ishāq, Aḥaī, and Ya[h]blāhā, as well, and the king's reliance on all of these holy men as advisers and spiritual protectors.<sup>30</sup> Yet, in the aftermath of Haššu's destruction of the fire temple (here a paraphrase of the *Vita* of 'Abdā), Ya[h]blāhā died and his successor Ma'na was exiled after refusing to disavow the vandalism of the Magian temple. This left Yazdgard prey to the evil influence of Magian priests and aristocrats, who drove him to persecute Christians.<sup>31</sup> Turning against his Christian subjects, Yazdgard placed himself in the hands of his earthly and supernatural enemies and soon faced the return of the affliction previously cured by the ministrations of the bishops. Summarizing this narrative arc, the Si'irt chronicler states:

The Magi hated Yazdgard, because he mistreated them upon his rise to the throne, decreased the power of their leaders, and was favorable to the Christians, allowing them to build churches. They mocked and cursed him in fire temples. But the prayers of the fathers, his contemporaries, addressed to God for him, protected him from the demon, according to the promise made by Christ, our Lord, to his apostles. But when Ya[h]blāhā died and Ma'na was exiled, the demon took possession of Yazdgard and accomplished what it had long sought to do to him. His death caused the Magi great joy.<sup>32</sup>

The account of the *Chronicle of Si'irt* presents a very interesting object lesson for both Christians and their non-Christian rulers (a political arrangement that was the norm in the east, but was considered an aberration in the Mediterranean well into the Middle Ages). The author presents the Magian elite as regicides who consort with demons. The king, Yazdgard, is largely a cipher, willing to do the right thing on behalf of the Christians with the proper tutelage, but easily influenced by advisers acting against his interests. It is Christian prayer and advice that time and time again keeps Yazdgard from falling into error in the administration of his empire and protects the king from his human and demonic enemies. Yet, when Yazdgard renounced this protection he faced the fate long held at bay by his Christian defenders. In essence, the author of the *Chronicle of Si'irt* neatly welded together the conflicting images of Yazdgard: protector and new Constantine, persecutor and Magian dupe, into a parable of Christian empowerment under non-Christian rule.

Although Yazdgard would never be the second Constantine imagined by the bishops of the synods of 410 and 420, later Christian writers were forced

<sup>29</sup> *Chronicle of Si'irt* 1.205–7.

<sup>30</sup> *Chronicle of Si'irt* 1.205–7, 212–3, 214–16.

<sup>31</sup> *Chronicle of Si'irt* 1.214–8.

<sup>32</sup> *Chronicle of Si'irt* 1.219–20.

to accommodate the rhetoric of hope invented by Yazdgard's contemporaries. Christian historians and hagiographers in Greek or West Syrian traditions ignored or minimized Yazdgard's culpability in the persecutions of his final year. For the Christians of the Church of the East, living under permanent non-Christian rule, the story of Yazdgard came to represent both the precarious nature of minority status in the medieval Near East and, paradoxically, the immense spiritual power vested in the leaders of the Church of the East. Christian historians transformed Yazdgard, "sinner" and "second Constantine," into a symbol of the promise and perils of non-Christian rule, the power of the Church, and the inevitable triumph of God's will over saints, sinners and kings alike.

### **Appendix: Christian Syriac and Greek Source Traditions for the Reign of Yazdgard I (399–420)**

#### ***A. Acts of the Synod of 410 (Mar Ishāq) and Synod of 420 (Mar Ya[h]blāhā): Synodicon orientale 17–36, 36–42.***

The collection of the synodal acts of the "Nestorian" Church of the East known as the *Synodicon orientale* probably was compiled during the patriarchate of Timothy I (780–823). The text survives in Alqosh ms. Vosté 169 [= Scher 90] (pre-fourteenth century) and its nineteenth-century copies (used by Chabot). The original manuscript contains the acts of both western and eastern church councils (beginning with Nicaea) along with episcopal letters, assembled in the patriarchate of Elias I (1028–49). See Chabot, *Synodicon orientale*, Braun, *Buch der Synhados*; de Halleux, "Symbole," J.-M. Vosté, *Catalogue de la Bibliothèque syro-chaldéenne du couvent de Notre-Dame des semences près d'Alqoš (Iraq)*, (Rome/Paris: Geuthner, 1929), Addai Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques conservés dans la bibliothèque du couvent des Chaldéens de Notre-Dame-des-Semences", *Journal Asiatique*, Sér. 10: 8, 9 (1906).

#### ***B. Ecclesiastical Histories of the Church of the East/Lives of "Catholicoi."***

Early versions of the lives of those metropolitans (Ishāq, Aḥai, Ya[h]blāhā) who interacted with Yazdgard I are lost. Late East Syrian chronicle traditions, however, appear to draw on some sort of "Nestorian" church history organized around the biographies of important bishops. This material may go back to the ecclesiastical histories of Išō'dnāḥ of Basra (fl. ca. 850), Daniel bar Maryām (fl. ca. 650), or to earlier works. Much of this material is preserved in later Arabic-language compilations, including the *Chronicle of Si'irt* and the *Kitāb al-majdal*. See Degen, "Daniel bar Maryam," and "Kirchengeschichte."

#### ***C. Lives of Mārūtā of Maiferqāt***

1. Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.8.1–20 (= 353.9–354.27).  
Günther Christian Hansen, ed., *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderts (GCS) n.f. 1 (Berlin: Akademie, 1995). Composed in Greek, approximately 440.

2. Greek *Vita Maruthae* (shorter), *Bibliotheca hagiographica graeca* 2265. Jacques Noret, “La vie grecque ancienne de S. Marūtā de Mayferqat,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 91 (1973). 77–103. Probably a translation from Syriac (Noret, “Vie grecque,” 102). May date to the end of fifth century or, probably, later. Contains an odd mis-transcription of Yazdgard’s name, as Πειροζγέρδης.
3. Greek *Vita Maruthae* (longer): *BHG* 2266. Noret, “Vie grecque.” An expansion of *BHG* 2265 found in the imperial *menologium* of Michael IV (1034–41).
4. Armenian *Vita Maruthae*, *Bibliotheca hagiographica orientale* 720. Lewond M. Ališan, ed., *Vark’ ew vkayabanut’iwnk’ srboc’ hatentir k’alealk’ i carentrac’ = Vitae et passiones sanctorum* (Venice: Mechitarist Congregation, 1874) 2.17–32. Translated from Syriac by the priest Gagig and his deacon Grigor. References to Kavād in the text (p.32) indicate that the *vita* is sixth century or later in date; see Ralph Marcus, “The Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat,” *Harvard Theological Review* 25 (1932) 47–71 at 52–54; J.M. Fiey, “Mārūtā de Martyropolis d’après ibn al-Azraq (†1181),” *Analecta Bollandiana* 94 (1976), 35–45; Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999).

#### D. Syriac Martyr Acts

1. *Acta* of ‘Abdā. Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.38: Léon Parmentier, ed., Günther Christian Hansen, rev., *Theodoret Kirchengeschichte*, GCS n.f. 5 (Berlin: Akademie, 1998). Composed in Greek, approximately 449/50.
2. Paul Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* [=AMS] (Paris and Leipzig: Harrassowitz 1890–97) 4.250–3 (*BHO* 6). Fragmentary Syriac *vita* survives in ms. British Museum add. 7200 (thirteenth century); Georg Hoffmann, *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer*, Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, vol.7, no.3 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1888), 35–6; Oskar Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer aus dem Syrischen übersetzt*, Bibliothek der Kirchenväter 22 (Kempten/Munich: Kösel, 1915), 139–41.
3. *Vitae et passiones sanctorum* 1.1–5. Paul Peeters, “Une passion arménienne des ss. Abdas, Hormisdas, Šāhîn (Suenes) et Benjamin,” *AB* 28 (1909), 399–415.
4. *Acta* of Narsai the Ascetic/də Bēṭ Raziqāyē: AMS 4.170–80 (*BHO* 786). Survives in ms. Diyarbakir 96 (eleventh-twelfth century) and ms. British Museum add. 7200 (13th century); see Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 36–8; Braun, *Ausgewählte*, 142–9.
5. *Acta* of Ṭāṭāq: AMS 4.181–4 (*BHO* 1139).

Survives in Ms Diyarbakir 96 (11th–12th century).

6. *Acta* of Ten Martyrs of Bēt Garmē: AMS 4.184–8 (*BHO* 387).  
Survives in ms. Diyarbakir 96 (eleventh–twelfth century). See Devos, “Martyrs,” “Abgar”; Van Rompay, “Impetuous Martyrs”; Lamboigts, *Martyrium*, 363–375; Wiessner, *Untersuchungen*.

### E. Roman Secular Histories

1. Procopius of Caesarea, *De bello persico*, 1.2.7–11.  
Jakob Haury, ed., *Procopius caesariensis opera omnia*, (Leipzig: Teubner, 1962). Composed ca. 550. See Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth century* (London: Duckworth, 1985).
2. Agathias Scholasticus, *Historia*, 4.26.3–8.  
Rudolf Keydell, ed., *Agathiae Myrinaei historiarum libri quinque, Corpus fontium historiae byzantinae* 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967). Composed after 558. See Averil Cameron, “Agathias on the Sassanians,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23 (1969), 69–183; Eadem, *Agathias* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970); Mark Whitby, “Greek Historical Writing after Procopius: Variety and Vitality,” in Av. Cameron, L.I. Conrad, *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I*, 25–80.

### F. Later Synthetic Historical Traditions

#### Greek

1. Theodore Lector, *Historia tripartita/ecclesiastica* 313 = 92.24–7. Günther Christian Hansen, ed., *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, GCS n.f. 3 (Berlin: Akademie, 1995). Compiled ca. 518.
2. Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia* AM 5905, 5906, 5916, pp.82–3, 85. Carolus de Boor, ed., *Chronographia* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1883–5). Composed ca. 813. See Brooks, “Sources”; Conrad, “Theophanes,” “Conquest”; Mango, Scott, *Chronicle*; Pigulevskaja, “Theophanes’ *Chronographia*.”
3. George Cedrenus, *Compendium historiarum*, 1.586.3–7.  
Immanuel Bekker, ed., *Georgius Cedrenus, Ioannis Scylitzae opera*, CSHB 7–8 (Bonn: Weber, 1838–9). Compiled ca. eleventh–twelfth century.
4. Nikephoros Kallistos, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 14.1.  
PG 145–7. Compiled ca. 1303/09–1317/20.

#### “West Syrian” (Syriac, Arabic, etc.)

1. Thomas the Presbyter, *Chronicle* (= “*Chronicle of 724*”), 137.9–22. E.W. Brooks, ed., “Chronicon miscellaneum ad annos p.Chr. 724 pertinens,” *Chronica Minora II, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium* 3 = *Scriptores syri* 3 (Paris: Typographeo Reipublica, 1904), 77–154. Compiled ca. 650. The material related to Yazdgard is not clearly connected to other

sources. See A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1993).

2. *Chronicle of Zuqnān*, 1.192–3.

Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Incerti auctoris chronicon anonymum pseudo-dionysianum vulgo dictum I, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium* 91 = *Scriptores syri* 43 (Louvain: Durbecq, 1953). Probably composed ca. 775–6. Harrak interprets the surviving ms. (*Codex Zuqninensis*, Vat. Sir. 162) as an *autographon*, with repairs of the late ninth or early tenth century. See Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnān. Parts III and IV. A.D. 488–775*, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation* 36 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999).

3. Agapius [Maḥbūb] of Manbij, *Kitāb al-‘unwān*, 309 (= 64v-65r).

Louis Cheikho, ed., *Agapius episcopus Mabbugensis historia universalis. Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium* 65 = *Scriptores arabici* 10 (Beirut: Typographeo Catholico, 1912). Composed ca. 942. The chronicle was well regarded by al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956) (*Tanbīh* 154). Earliest manuscript, Ms. Sinai arab 580, is late tenth century.

4. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 164–5, 171–2.

Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche jacobite d’Antioche (1166–1199)* (Paris: Leroux, 1901).

5. *Chronicle of 1234*, 1.173–5.

Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens. Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium* 81–2 = *Scriptores syri* 36–7 (Paris: Gabalda, 1916–20).

6. Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, 3.45–59.

Jean-Baptiste Abbeloos, Thomas Joseph Lamy, eds., *Gregorii Barhebraei chronicon ecclesiasticum* (Paris/Louvain: Peeters, 1872–7).

“East Syrian” (Syriac, Arabic, etc.)

1. *Chronicle of Si‘irt*, 1.204–7, 209–220 [PO 5.2.316–9, 321–32].

Scher, *Histoire nestorienne*. Likely composed (in Arabic) in the tenth century (between 912–1020). See Degen, “Miszellen”; Fiey, “Išō‘dnāu”; Pierre Nautin, “L’auteur de la ‘Chronique de Séert:’ Išō‘denaḥ de Baṣra,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 186 (1974), 113–26; Sako, “Sources”; C.F. Seybold, “Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert) par Addai Scher,” *ZDMG* 66 (1912), 742–6.

2. Elias of Nisibis/Bar Šīnāyā, *Opus Chronologicum*, 1.110–1.

E.W. Brooks, ed., *Opus chronologicum, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium* 62–3 = *Scriptores syri* 21–4 (Paris: Typographeo Reipublicae, 1909–10). A Syriac (with Arabic translation) chronography surviving in a manuscript dated 1019 (possibly an *autographon* for the Syriac text, written in a single hand).

3. Mārī b. Sulaymān/‘Amr b. Mattā/Ṣalība b. Yūḥannā, *Kitāb al-majdal*, 1.30–6, 2.23–9.

Henri Gismondi, ed., *Maris Amri et Slibae. De patriarchis nestorianum* (Rome: de Luigi, 1896–9). The Arabic *Kitāb al-majdal* survives in two recensions, a seven-chapter version attributed to Mārī b. Sulaymān (twelfth century) and ‘Amr b. Mattā’s five-chapter text (fourteenth century), with Ṣalība b. Yūḥannā seen as a contemporary plagiarist of ‘Amr. Holmberg offers an alternative reconstruction, that ‘Amr was the eleventh-century author of the seven-chapter version, revised by Ṣalība (fourteenth century). See Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, Studi e Testi 118, 133, 146, 147, 172] (Vatican City: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1944–53), 2.200–2, 216–8; Holmberg, “Reconsideration.”

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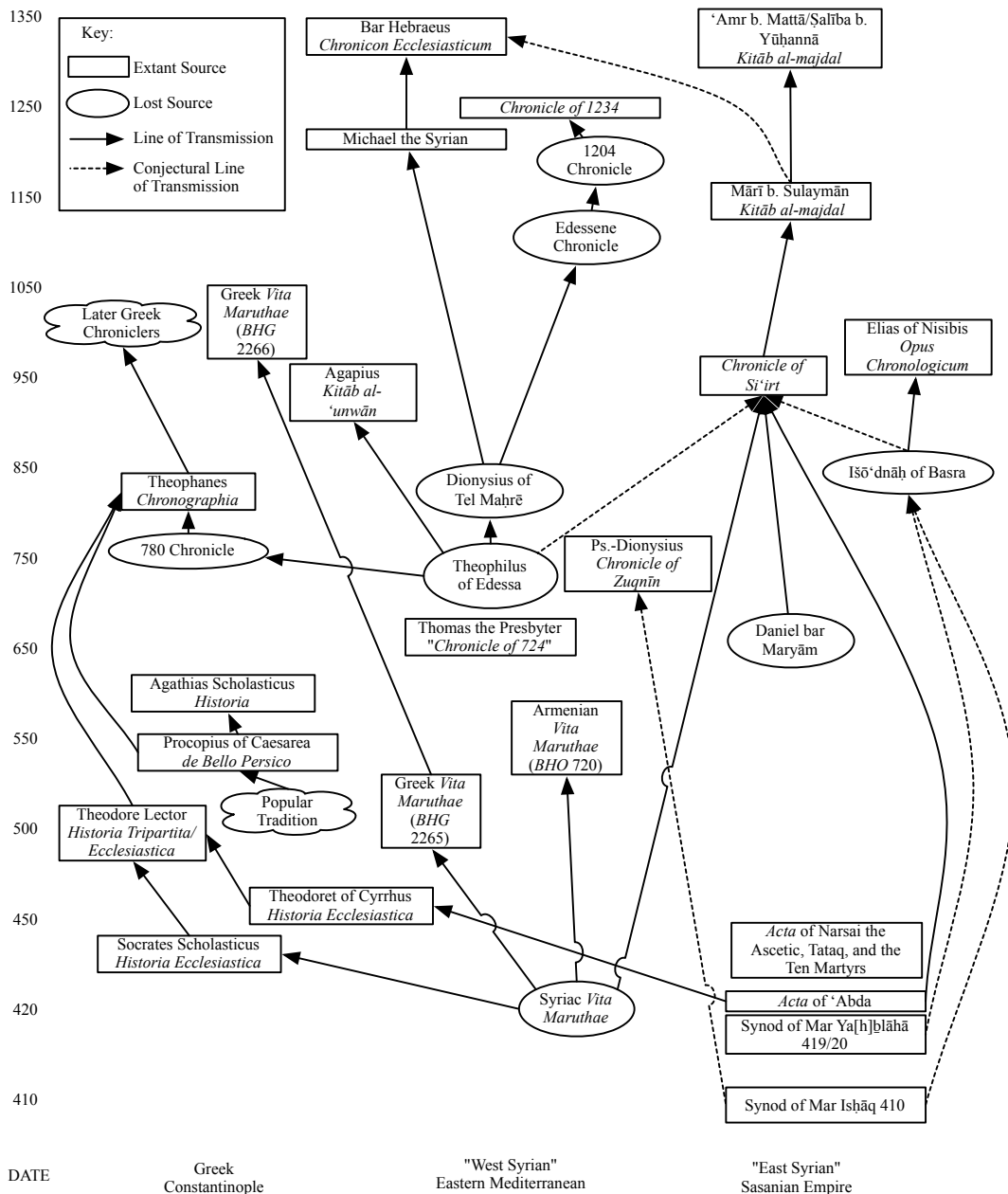


Figure. The Transmission of Syriac, Greek, and Arabic Historical Writing on Yazdgar I